1: Schuster E-5 (1954-1955) 1958 SQ18 Yanoama SQ18
Waica

The Sociology of the Waica
[Die Soziologie der Waika]

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Copenhagen: 1958
Proceedings of the 32nd International Congress of Americanists
Pages 114-122

Translated from the German by Shelton Hicock

Human Relations Area Files

1966

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I shall describe to you in the following some aspects of the social structure of the same Indian tribe whose conceptions about the soul Herr Dr. Zerries has just discussed. The title, "Sociology," is too presumptuous, insofar as today I intend to deal with only the larger social units and thus touch upon only a small sector of the sociological field. I shall be able to present to you only raw expedition-material; the comparative arrangement of these data in South American cultural history will be the work of the next few months.

The Waika /Waica/ inhabit the upper Orinoco river region in southern Venezuela; their area of habitation, however, is not limited by the Sierra Parima, in which the Orinoco rises and which forms the mountain border with Brazil, but rather extends into Brazilian soil far beyond this mountain chain, about to the middle of the northern tributaries of the Rio Negro and Rio Branco. The Sierra Parima therefore is more the backbone of the living space of this Indian group, which, according to the best estimates, contains about fifty thousand persons and an area of about half the size of West Germany. According to external appearances, this region is counted as tropical rain forest; seasonal differences are only slight and are practically without influence on the life and culture of the people. The critical cultural importance of the forest lies in its isolating effect: between the habitation area of the Waika and the first mixed settlement there extends an almost uninhabited forest-belt several hundred kilometers wide, and since there is very little river traffic and as other means of transportation there are only onerously traversable Indian paths, the culture of the Waika has been able to remain almost completely pure. Only a few material things from our world have as yet found their way to them: a few machetes and axes, a few matches and fishhooks, which an American mission working from 1947 to 1955 under very difficult conditions and we ourselves brought along; since the Waika do not maintain any contacts of their own downriver, however, the barely begun acculturation process does not go on /115/ by itself, but ebbs away the moment the visiting whites leave Waika country.

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101 (197) Thus the geographic situation of the Waika and their extremely limited contact with civilization are depicted in a few words. Because the name is simple and well-known, I have so far spoken only of the "Waika," but now it is time to make a more precise distinction when first we turn to the question of tribal organization. On Venezuelan soil this people is divided into three large groups, all of whom, disregarding slight differences, speak the same language and have the same culture. The Shidishana /Shiriana/ live north of the Ocamo, a northern tributary of the upper Orinoco; to the north their territory is bordered by the Cariban Makiritare, with whom the Shidishana have in many ways entered into a close economic and social symbiosis. Adjacent to the Shidishana on the south are the Waika proper (the name means "killer"); they inhabit the region between Ocamo and Orinoco and with a few of their villages extend over to the southern Orinoco bank. The large and completely unexplored region south of the Orinoco to the Brazilian border and beyond, however, belongs, at least in its northern part, to the Shamatairi /Samatari/, the "tapir people," who are one of the most primitive groups of this people, stand strictly inimically opposed to any contact, and thus do not show even the slight traces of acculturation that the Waika do. As far as I can see, there is no reliable information available concerning the population groups east of the Sierra Parima, and unquestionably the picture for the Venezuelan area from whose northeastern part another group, named Okomatairi, has been reported will be improved later. The terms Waika and Shidishana (or Shiriana) used in the literature as a collective designation for these culturally similar virgin-forest groups are not very suitable, since they refer to subgroups; on the other hand, the name Guaharibo used by foreigners does not belong to the language of this people and is recognized only by the Shidishana. The only name that encompasses all the subgroups and is understood by the natives themselves as a general term is the word "Yanoama," which means "voice of the house" and contrasts with "nabe," by which all foreigners are meant indiscriminately -- all who do not speak

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101 the language of the Waika, Shidishana, or Shamatairi, therefore the neighboring Indians as well.

Thus the term "Yanoama" refers to the cultural and linguistic identity; it does not have the least political aspect. There is no tribe of the Yanoama, nor is there any tribe of the Waika, the Shidishana, or the Shamatairi. At most one can speak of the "people"; but one must bear in mind that there is no institution, no office, that is representative of this people. Also the cognizance of this term in the thinking of the natives /116/ remains general and therefore inevitably vague, parallel to the small amount of geographical knowledge, which is limited to what they themselves have traversed, that is, as a rule, to the circle of the nearest villages, which are about one to two days' journey away from one's own.

101 621 Geopolitical thought, which would find expression in a more extensive political organization, is unknown to the Yanoama; their conceptual world revolves around the village.

The village is the unit in which one thinks and after which one names himself: when questioned a Waika will never answer that he is a Waika or a Yanoama, but rather will give his village name, say, "Bolitaotedi," whereby "tedi" (village), like the Spanish "pueblo," refers less to the settlement and more to the

829 people who live in it. It seems obvious that one is a Waika, for the slight contact with civilization has not yet led in their thinking to distinguishing their own culture from that of foreigners; the foreigner has remained an individual guest with peculiar habits and has not yet become the representative of a large, strange

101 621 world. It is not obvious, however, to which village one belongs; village membership is the decisive political and sociological characteristic of the individual.

361 Externally the village is a clearing in the virgin forest, usually oval in ground plan, with a large diameter from 30 to 100 meters;

[62] the houses line the edge of this clearing. On the average a village is inhabited by about 100 persons. The villages of the Shamatairi south of the Orinoco, however, are much larger; according to our

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361 scanty knowledge, their population varies between 200 and 300.
161 Whereas there in the unexplored south organizational forms for
[621] larger numbers of people have evidently developed, the sociological system of the Waika is organized for only the above-named figure of a hundred village inhabitants; a surplus of births is answered by village partition.

628 The politically independent villages are partners in war and peace and for trading and visiting, and the momentary, frequently changing relationships of the villages to one another give the political situation in Waika territory its stamp. Let us first look
721 at the hostile relationships. Affairs involving women are for the
[583] most part the cause of war; if a wife is sought in other villages, and if the offer is turned down, one resorts to abducting a woman. Once there has been bloodshed in quarrels originating from this, the war is self-perpetuating; the original cause has not been forgotten, to be sure, but because of its slight intensity in the conceptual world it in no way suffices as a motive for the continuation
726 of the war. Rather, what does not permit breaking the chain of attacks repeated at intervals of a few months, in which the enemy men are killed, but the women abducted, /117/ is ideas and analogous
728 to blood revenge. Concluding peace is possible only when there has been no bloodshed for a long period of time, and hostile relations
628 often last for generations. Thus Waika country is covered with a network of hostile relationships of varying degrees, and, picking a village at random, one can distinguish a series of villages that are friendly, benevolently indifferent, neutral, sympathetic with
[726] the enemy, and, finally, completely hostile. For no two villages, however, is this series completely identical; there are no extensive alliances; war is an affair of the individual village, and a friendly village is aided only if there are personal reasons for hostility. No Waika village is without an enemy, and because of the many crisscrossings of the degrees of relationships the political situation is extremely complicated. We therefore see that even on the broadest social plane -- that of the people as a cultural and linguistic whole -- there is a very pronounced

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628 tendency toward the independence of the next smaller parts acting on this plane and forming it -- namely, the villages.

These hostile relationships between the villages are external evidence of a centrifugal force in Waika culture seeking detach-
628 ment. The opposite tendency, the centripetal force toward bind-
574 ing the villages together, finds its expression in active intercourse
438 for trading and visiting. These trips, which are performed with such zeal that practically every second day there is some associa-tion with another village, from or to it, can be divided into sev-
438 eral groups, according to their purpose. First, trips purely for trade take place: each village prefers to produce or procure a certain article of the material culture so that it practically has a monopoly on it. One village supplies especially fine tobacco, another is favorably located in a place where much arrow-cane grows, a third produces pots because good clay is present in the vicinity, another is the supplier of hunting dogs for the neighbor-hood, and the village closest to us naturally barters primarily with European ironware. This formation of centers for specific goods naturally favored the development of commercial traffic; the trading itself is carried out over very long periods and thus resembles a gift-exchange behind which there is a certain amount
437 of compulsion. When one knows that the partner has more objects of a kind than he justifiably needs for himself, it is requested very urgently, and the one so entreated may not refuse, if he does not want to risk enmity and war -- he can, of course, get his revenge
[182] in his own way the next time. This system successfully prevents
556] any accumulation of capital; no Waika possesses noticeably more
565] than his neighbor; there are no social distinctions, and consequently no vertical classes.

628 Besides trade, the transmission of news, which proceeds in the
574 form of a /118/ ceremonial conversational-singing and not in
[203] simple dialogue, is also one purpose of such trips, as are wife-
[533] seeking and courting in other villages. As a rule all these trips
[584] are made by a group of men or young people who are guests for one or at most two nights in the strange village and then, after the trading has been done, oddly enough not until the last minute

574 628 /118 cont./ on the morning of departure, return to their own village. In contrast to this hastily accomplished visiting by small groups or even individuals, there is the migration of whole villages. During the (796) great palm-fruit festival, which takes place in February and of which I shall show you a film in a few days, the villages visit each other, which is often done in such a way that the two villages celebrate first in the settlement of the one and the other. The various above-mentioned purposes of this intervillage intercourse [184] are naturally combined in practice. The trading and visiting trips are responsible for the remarkable cultural unity of the Waika region, and the consciousness of this in the minds of the inhabitants. 574 On the other hand, in many cases they are the occasion and op- 721 portunity for quarrels and warfare; refusal to trade and refusal of 628 a girl lead at least to ill feeling, and, as was reported to us, neutral villages are sometimes invited to the palm-fruit festival solely for the purpose of attacking the men at a favorable moment in order to kill them and keep the women as booty. The language has a special word for this type of hostile act, and the procedure was described to us in detail, so there can be no doubt about its occasional occurrence.

628 182 In summary, the following may be said about the intervillage relations presented in brief form. The balance between the two tendencies, the binding one and the separative one, both of which -- probably in correspondence to each other -- are expressed in remarkably vivid form, stamps the picture of the political organization in Waika country. The separative forces, in that they protect the detachment of the villages, prevent the formation of alliances on a wider scale, which could lead to political ascendancy, to regional groupings, to divisions -- in any case to a political unit extending beyond the village. Thus, in a cultural sense, these separative forces act indirectly in the same direction as the binding ones: both promote and maintain cultural homogeneity in a large territory. For since the individual villages are too weak to detach themselves from the leveling tensions /Verspannung/ with their neighbors, but, on the other hand, lasting, stable alliances cannot be achieved, political and cultural divisions

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628 are not feasible. The villages remain /119/ dependent on one
182 another in economic, sociological, and political respects, in connection with which the frequent change of partners guarantees the multiplicity of the contacts. Politically independent, with equal rights, and not anchored in any superordinate organization, the villages are the knots in a tightly woven network of active mutual relationships, in part of a positive kind, in part negative; the tension inherent in these relationships represents, on the one hand, the dynamic factor and, on the other hand, the stabilizing factor in the social life of the Waika.

621 Up to now I have used the term village as though it represented a stable unit; if we look at its internal structure, however, it turns out that this local body, the settlement community, very tightly united in itself, again is made up of individual groups which are distinguished from one another on certain occasions.
621 In many cases the festivals of human beings rather than their daily
796 life offer the opportunity to recognize the nature of their social
182 grouping: during festive occasions the community itself is represented and confirms this representation in ceremonial. Among
621 the Waika the ceremonial gift-exchange was the key to under-
431 standing the village structure. That is, after a successful large-scale hunt, in which the men of almost every house take part, it is customary to exchange baskets of roasted meat and a few bananas within the village. This exchange takes place, however, not between the individual houses, but between groups of houses: no baskets of meat are exchanged within the same group of houses, but rather only to and from the houses of the other groups. The village investigated by us was divided, according to the paths of exchange, into three groups of houses, which -- perhaps by chance -- were arranged in strips: on both sides of the oval several houses were combined in a group, and the two houses opposite each other in the middle likewise did not exchange gifts.
621 Now the next step must be to look at the reflection of the
611 sociologically inadequate term "group of houses" on the kinship level: the members of the individual groups of houses are to be characterized, according to their kinship relations, as bilateral and bilocal groups of families.

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000 and bilocal groups of families. The group of families -- the
621 multiplicity of relationships permits no other designation --
431 is therefore the next smaller constituent element of the village unit; to be sure, the ceremonial gift-exchange emphasizes the subdivision of the village, in that it underlines the affiliation of the partner to one of the two other groups of families, but, on the other hand, also joins the three groups of families as common inhabitants of the same village.

It might now seem that the group of families, which appears in the gift-exchange as a functional unit, is only a chance conglomeration of nuclear families and thus of minor importance.
621 It comes into operation, however, on another decisive occasion,
166 namely, in connection with /120/ the migratory movements, which I shall sketch for you in a few words. The inhabitants of a
[361] village never remain longer than about three to four weeks in their
[342] main village, that clearing in the virgin forest with relatively permanently built houses; then they leave home for a period at least equally long, but seldom farther away than one to two days of travel, and build themselves in a favorable spot in the forest a row of small, triangular huts which are just large enough to provide room for a nuclear family, i.e., the parents and their unmarried children. The new place is chosen according to the
262 possibilities that it offers for gathering forest fruits and for hunting;
245 nevertheless economic reasons are not actually the cause for this
194 migration, for even during this period they continue to live from
166 the very fruitful banana planting near the main village. About every ten days a group of men go and fetch additional supplies of bananas, which the Waika today use for about 90 per cent
[222] of their diet. To be sure, during this forest period they live on
[224] gathered fruits and by hunting more than they do in the main village, and we shall therefore hardly go wrong in assuming that there are involved in these short-term forest sojourns traditionally preserved reminiscences of the era of pure hunting for wild food on the part of the Waika, undoubtedly still not very far in the past.

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621 166 241 These periodically recurring radial movements from a fixed center (the village with its planting) do not affect, in sociological respects, the substance of the village: normally the whole village migrates. In this respect, however, it is different with regard to a second type of village movement, which is not characterized by the going back and forth of the short forest-sojourns, but rather takes place over longer periods of time and only in one direction. The Waika live only about five years from one planting and then move to a new one laid out beforehand, which is usually about a day's journey away. Practically every village known to us has an old and a new planting, for since the chonta palm (Guilielma gasipaes), still cultivated today and useful in many ways, has a different life span than the various types of bananas, overlapping in the utilization of the plantings cannot be [173] avoided. If a newly established planting is bearing enough bananas, the whole village is moved to the new planting; the names and the site of earlier plantings are remembered exactly, however, so that from this the history of each individual village, i.e., its shifting in Waika territory, and consequently the history of the Waika themselves in their territorial aspect, can be reconstructed for two to three generations. Such a move to a new place, however, is also the occasion for changes in the composition of the village, for a split as a rule, for in the meantime, because of the enormous /121/ surplus of births, which the Waika have to register today, the village has grown far beyond the limit of the number of persons that can be governed well under their institution-poor system. The partition of the village is not done at discretion, but exactly along the lines of separation indicated by the above-mentioned composition by groups of families. One or more groups [431] of families are the bearers of the new villages, and the memory [182] of the way the new village was founded by the union of several groups of families is ceremonially represented as shown, in the gift-exchange.

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Therefore two types of nomadism are superimposed on each other in the migratory movements of the Waika: the nomadism of the very active hunting for wild food, which is represented today as a radial movement from an agricultural central-point, stamps the annual cycle, whereas the agricultural village-move, which follows the fields cleared by burning, occurs in a cycle of a few years and has a greater spatial range than the wild-food forays. To express it in a different manner: a wild-food nomadism more restricted spatially and temporally fills out the periods of the more extended agricultural migrations. Even at the ends of these periods, when both cycles overlap, they are felt by the Waika to be quite different matters and not mutually substitutable: after they have worked for a time in the new, scarcely begun planting, and the external reasons for a forest sojourn (such as change of living place and more favorable possibilities for gathering and hunting) are assuredly present, they still move off once more in the traditional manner to another place in the forest -- the laying out of a new plantation, even with the great similarity of external circumstances, is basically different from the forest life of hunting for wild food and in no way a substitute for it.

The short sojourns in the forest are, as was said, usually made by the whole village, whereas with the laying out of new plantings the group of families comes into the foreground as the working unit. One might conclude from this fact that the formation and the sociological importance of the groups of families is connected with the introduction of agriculture. I should like to make the opposite conclusion, however, that merely the old wild-food settlement-unit has maintained itself in these groups of families in the present larger agricultural village-society. The relationship of the groups of families to hunting for wild food is clear from the fact that the gift-exchange carried on by the groups of families is quite predominantly an exchange of meat, to which a few roasted bananas are added, and can only take place after a hunt.

Thus the sociological findings regarding the larger social units of the Yanoama reflect the picture of the other cultural

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105 621 182 realms of this people: /122/ elements related to hunting for wild food, such as the group of families connected by kinship in various ways, for which, in accordance with its structure, one could probably use "roving horde" or similar terms, have held their ground and actively maintained themselves against those forms connected with agriculture and sedentariness, in our case the permanent village society. The Waika are now just at the point where the high economic preponderance of cultivated plants is beginning to make corresponding changes in the noneconomic cultural spheres.